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TAGS: PREL PTER IZ SY PGOV
SUBJECT: GOI RESPONSE ON U.S.-SYRIA-IRAQ TRILATERAL
INITIATIVE

REF: SECSTATE 53817 (NOTAL)

Classified By: Pol-Mil Minister Counselor Michael Corbin for reasons 1.
4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (S) Summary: In response to The Ambassador's presentation of reftel demarche on trilateral talks among the U.S., Iraq and Syria, Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki indicated that the concept had merit, but that he preferred that such engagement be broached bilaterally, first between the U.S. and Syria. He noted Syria has its own links with Iraq and that if the bilateral talks went well he would consider the trilateral approach on security. He felt strongly, based on his experience with the Syrians, that Iraq's formal participation in a trilateral without bilateral preparation would not advance any issues of common concern and lead to the Syrians playing the U.S. off against Iraq. In a separate conversation, PM Advisor Sadiq Rikabi said that Iraq's problems with Syria are not a matter of security along the border but stem from a political agenda in Damascus that includes harboring those who support insurgency in Iraq. He said that a trilateral effort that merely addresses security measures along the border would not bring a serious commitment on the part of the Syrian government. Rikabi noted, however, that this is an important issue and indicated that Iraq would be interested to assist and coordinate in our engagements. He agreed to give the proposal more consideration and follow up with specific ideas. End Summary.

¶2. (S) The Ambassador raised the idea of conducting trilateral talks among the U.S., Iraq and Syria per reftel at a meeting with Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki on June 4. The PM indicated that the concept had merit and he supported the objectives, but he did not believe that including Iraq formally in a trilateral mechanism would help advance those objectives. He said he understood the U.S. would send a military team to Damascus to discuss security and thought this could be positive. He suggested based on his experience with the Syrians that Syria would try to play the Iraqis off against the Americans if the talks were conducted trilaterally at this point. The PM said he preferred that such engagement be broached bilaterally - between the U.S. and Syria, an engagement he strongly encouraged. He asked that Iraq play an active "back seat" and coordination role as this initiative gets underway. Iraq's formal seat at the table can come down the line but it would defeat the purpose and undermine the objectives to include Iraq at this time. The PM emphasized that he encouraged U.S. engagement with Damascus - but felt strongly that Iraq's formal inclusion at this time would undermine what we seek to obtain. Iraq can play a better and more constructive role, and the U.S. will have more success with Damascus, if it remains behind the scenes.

¶3. (S) Earlier on June 4, Ambassador's Senior Advisor Brett McGurk engaged PM Advisor Sadiq Rikabi on reftel, soliciting Rikabi's views on the possibility of holding trilateral talks. Rikabi said that Iraq's problems with Syria are not a

matter of security along the border but stem from a political agenda in Damascus that includes harboring those who support insurgency in Iraq. Rikabi reported that he delivered this message to the Syrian Foreign Minister the last time he visited Damascus. Rikabi said the Syrian government lies, saying it intends to help stem the flow of cross-border support to militants, but then allows this support to continue. The border issues are important but they are a red herring compared to the political agenda in Damascus by which Syria harbors insurgent financiers and encourage terrorist flows outside its borders.

¶14. (S) Rikabi said that if Syria supports a trilateral initiative simply consisting of establishing a committee to monitor security along the Syria-Iraq border, it will mean that the Syrian government is not serious about resolving the challenges between them. Rikabi said that resolution of Iraq's problems with Syria will require concrete political commitments from Damascus. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad himself needs to order that support to Iraq's insurgency from Syria must cease, otherwise the two countries cannot move forward. Rikabi noted, however, that this is an important issue and indicated that Iraq would be interested in a trilateral engagement after the landscape has been prepared. He agreed to give the proposal more consideration and follow up with specific ideas.

¶15. (S) COMMENT: Maliki's response underlines the GOI's support for U.S. engagement with Syria (and its own interest in engaging Damascus) but Iraqi wariness over Syria's poor record on security. The GOI has repeatedly emphasized the need for the Syrian government to do more to counter foreign fighters as well as the insurgent fundraising and extremist

networks in Syria that provide support to insurgents in Iraq.

The GOI has considerable negative experience with Damascus reneging on promises, including Syria's failure to designate authorities to cooperate with Iraq on border security. At the same time, Syria has routinely criticized Iraq for not doing enough on its side of the border, shifting the conversation towards Syria's efforts, and its need for more resources. Maliki's green light for a bilateral process as a foundation for a possible trilateral could allow the U.S. side to present the Syrians with specific items to accomplish including on exchange of actionable intelligence against extremist networks, and focus on land border crossings where the GOI is attempting to improve its procedures. END COMMENT.

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